

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 41U.S. NEWS & WORLD REPORT
12 November 1979

CIA 3.03 CIA Pubs

-Sec. Def. spending

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Analysis

Arms Gap: How Russia Stole a March on U.S.

Washington counted on the Kremlin to settle for second best. The cost of the blunder will be enormous—and not just in higher defense bills.

Fifteen years of miscalculations about Russian military intentions now are catching up with the United States.

That is the conclusion of top defense analysts, a consensus that has come to light in the debate over the new SALT treaty with Moscow. Their findings:

Washington since the mid-'60s has pursued strategic policies based on false assumptions about the Kremlin's aims. As a result, the U.S. has forfeited an enormous arms advantage and has opened the door to a Soviet bid for strategic superiority in the 1980s.

The upshot is a far-reaching reassessment of the U.S. defense posture. There is near unanimity among specialists that major changes in U.S. strategy and substantial increases in Pentagon spending are imperative, whether the Senate approves or rejects the strategic-arms-limitation treaty with Moscow.

Former Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger is one who warns that the alternative is potential disaster in the decade ahead. His words: "If present trends continue, the '80s will be a period of massive crisis for all of us."

The experts list three basic American assumptions, now exploded by Moscow's actions, that have led to a critical situation:

Assumption No. 1. U.S. policymakers in the 1960s concluded that the Kremlin would settle for permanent strategic inferiority. As Robert McNamara, Secretary of Defense in the Kennedy administration, put it: "There is no indication that the Soviets are seeking to develop a strategic nuclear force as large as ours." McNamara's Pentagon "Whiz Kids," therefore, unilaterally curbed competition with Russia.

In the '70s, officials modified the assessment. Russia, they decided, might close the missile gap but the U.S. could safely live with strategic parity or what now is called "essential strategic parity."

Fact. The Russians have spurned permanent strategic inferiority, or even parity. On the

ed a massive buildup that in 10 years has wiped out the huge lead held by the United States at the turn of the decade. Now, the Kremlin is making a strong bid to achieve superiority during the 1980s.

The United States has been slow to respond to this Soviet challenge. Asserts Kissinger: "Rarely in history has a nation so passively accepted such a radical change in the military balance."

Assumption No. 2. Russia would share America's interest in preserving strategic stability. The official U.S. theory: Neither the Americans nor the Russians would have an incentive to build a weapons system that could threaten a knockout attack against its opponent's nuclear forces. Such a threat would create a dangerous, hair-trigger situation in a crisis that both superpowers would seek to avoid.

Kissinger describes it as an "historically amazing theory that vulnerability contributed to peace and invulnerability contributed to the risks of war."

Also, American officials in the 1960s assumed that the Russians would embrace another U.S. concept—the doctrine of "mutually assured destruction." The idea of fighting a nuclear war was ruled out as unthinkable by

U.S. defense leaders. The sole aim should be to deter nuclear war by guaranteeing that an aggressor could not escape massive retaliation.

The United States has played by those rules since the 1960s, refraining from building weapons that could threaten a pre-emptive strike against Russian missile forces and from constructing a civil-defense system. It was assumed that the Soviet Union would see a mutual advantage in observing these rules.

Fact. The Russians have shown little interest in the U.S. notion of strategic stability. They are currently building a force of powerful ICBM's that could knock out 90 percent of America's 1,000 Minuteman missiles in a pre-emptive attack by 1984.

In other ways, too, Moscow has concentrated on plans to fight a nuclear war rather than simply to deter such a conflict. For example: Substantial resources have been devoted to a civil-defense program to protect the population in a nuclear exchange.

A leading French authority on Russia, Michel Tatu, sums up the Kremlin's thinking this way: "Deterrence should be replaced by a capacity for coercion. In other words, American nuclear power should be neutralized in order that Moscow gets a freer hand for military and political manipulations outside Soviet borders."

"For the purpose of neutralizing the American deterrent, the Soviet Union must have a nuclear-war-fighting capability. A nuclear war must be consid-



The Balance Shifts

Comparison of U.S. and Soviet Strategic Missiles and Bombers

1969 Total



1979 Total



Thus, during 10 years of disarmament talks, Russia has converted a U.S. advantage in 1969 of nearly 2 to 1 in strategic launchers to a Soviet advantage.